



New Trends
in Psychology

Personality as a Selection Criterion for Education of the Mentally Deficient

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Abstract: The mental deficiency problematics represents a controversial and thoroughly studied field by the literature, the specificity of its typologies, its etiology and the inclusion of this particular category in society in general and in education in particular, representing some of the few directions followed by the specialists. This article proposes an exhaustive theoretical approach of the structure of personality of the mentally deficient, with a particular incision on the deficiency of intellect and how its symptomatic portrait can influence the integration of the mentally deficient and the selection of the type of education, inclusive or separate. The personality is in this way perceived as a factor of influence but at the same time as a premise for choosing the educational context for the mentally deficient.

Keywords: personality; deficiency of intellect; learning difficulties; educational – therapeutic act; inclusive school; segregation, isolation; agent of change

1. The Specifics of the Personality of Mentally Deficient

The personality is the first, the most complex and often the most dramatic human reality which we contact and that we are going to influence, improve or even change. It is the main guide in the actual modelling of the human being (Zlate, 2009).

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The author considers that it has a great contribution to the correlation of all the psychic life components, by aligning them towards goals achievements, “it is the one that gives life to psychic mechanisms, marking and establishing directions, <forcing> them to actively interact, to differentiate and stabilize, to gather forces with the aim of fulfilling the goals” (Zlate, p. 253). The concept of personality has been defined in multiple manners by the literature. Out of these definitions, we will stop over two conclusive ones in which it is underlined the importance of the influence it has in developing the potential that every human being possesses to develop, to evolve and to integrate into its environment.

The concept of personality has been defined in multiple manners by the literature. Out of these definitions, we will stop over two conclusive ones in which it is underlined the importance of the influence it has in developing the potential that every human being possesses to develop, to evolve and to integrate into its environment. G. Allport (1981) offered an essentialist-structuralist definition of personality, considering that it represents that dynamic organisation within every individual of those psychophysical systems which govern its thinking and its typical behaviour (Allport, apud. Zlate, 2009, p. 261). The role of personality in everyone’s fulfilment and in its entire ontogenetical evolution has also been underlined by Eisenck (1953) who considered that personality is the more or less sturdy organisation of the human character, attitude, intelligence and physics, this particular organisation marking the type of adjustment to the environment. The impetus here is to underline the importance of the specificity of every individual, not only in terms of different psychic mechanisms (as it refers to structure, functionality, ends), but also in terms of the great variety of integrating them. Even though the psychic mechanism would be identical, especially with regards to the level of development, their output would be different because of the intervention of each individual’s personality, which assesses in different ways the existing potential.

These specifics but also the very importance of the personality in the human being’s ontogenesis, have determined numerous controversies in the literature regarding the best way to approach personality when it comes to mentally deficient people. Some authors have considered that we cannot talk about personality for the mentally deficient because of their impossibility to capture all those specific characteristics of the human personality and character. E. Verza on the other hand, another thorough, comprehensive researcher of the problematics of personality of the mentally deficient people, considers that it is utterly necessary to take this concept into account when it comes to this category, especially with regards to the possibility of

modelling it through the educational and recuperative-compensatory process. For a better understanding of this bias of opinions, it is necessary to define the very concept of mental deficiency/deficiency of intellect but also to establish what can be considered as a structure of the personality of the mentally deficient.

The mental deficiency represents a global insufficiency which affects personality as a whole, its structure, organisation, intellectual, emotional, psychomotor, adaptive-behavioural development, hereditary or “earned” after an organic or functional lesion of the central nervous system, which can manifest itself during the first years of life, different in gravity and intensity, depending of the medium level of the population, with direct consequences for the socio-professional adaptability, expertise and the social and personal autonomy. (Radu, 1999). Another thorough researcher of the mental disabilities, Rene Zazzo, considered that “the mental deficiency is the first zone of the mental insufficiency, an insufficiency which is relative to the society’s requirements, which can vary from a society to another, from an age to another, insufficiency whose detonators are biological and have an irreversible effect on the current study of knowledge” (Zazzo, 1979, p. 33). At the same time, according to the American Association for Mental Disorders, this refers to a below average functionality of the general intelligence, which originates itself in the development period and it is associated with disorders of the adaptive behaviour. These definitions are vivid proof of a singular portrait, with a different valence for each dimension of the personality, underlining the urge for a supplementary effort regarding the integration of the mentally deficient people. Even though components of the personality like disposition, aptitude, character, intelligence, creativity, and other elements of the cognitive subsystem can be the same at the normal and at the intellect deficient people, these have still a series of specific characteristics at the mentally deficient which are utterly necessary to approach when it comes to their inclusion into the educational and social context.

2. The Cognitive Portrait of the Mentally Deficient

Regarding the particularities of cognition displayed both in the educational and social context, the specific features of the mentally deficient people are quite easily recognised at all levels. As for perception, they normally display a lack of precision, a fragmentary perception, undifferentiated, with frequent disorders. At the same time, they are close to lacking sensitivity, especially the differential one, on the base of high sensorial thresholds. The low levels of sensitivity are usually one of the

features which can be identified at quite early stages at the mentally deficient children, which will manifest a negative influence over the perceptive-sensorial activity and over the development of their cognitive capacity.

The mentally deficient also present difficulties regarding the imagination, strongly related to the insufficiency of cognition, to the sensorial-representative-perceptive equipment and to the practical activities. Attention, which has been analysed by C. Paunescu, is lack of tenacity, mostly unstable. The most affected characteristics of attention are selectivity, stability and focusing. Attention is different for the intellect deficient people, not only regarding performance but also regarding their way of organising. Memory is characterised through a pretty accurate capacity of retaining information, based though on mechanical memorising. An obvious characteristic is the continuous penury of the retained information by the mentally deficient in comparison to the normal people (Radu, 1999). They also have a weak fidelity and lack of precision when it comes to evoking, omitting the details when revealed. M Rosca explains this phenomenon as “insufficient exercising of the adjustment function by the words notions included in the task of memorising” (Rosca, apud. Radu, 1999, p. 113). From this point of view, an inefficient learning with deficiencies in the retrieval area is endangered from the inside by an excessive, rapid, and massive oblivion for the mentally deficient. This type of oblivion is of no utility, creating instead a void of information. This way, the retrieval insufficiencies emphasize the intellectual inadequacies and the yield of the mentally retarded in the process of learning. (Radu, 1999). The judgement of the mentally deficient is a concrete one, situational, based in essence on the mechanical limitation of the actions and language of those who surround him. J. de Ajuriaguerra uses the term “intellectual disorders” when referring to their incapacity of making connexions (or the tendency of perceiving them erroneously), of synthetizing and structuring the forms and the partial units in wholes. Therefore, the mentally deficient are characterised by incomplete reasoning, starting often from partial, subjective, lack of meaning, data (Radu, 1999). S. I. Rubinstein identified three main characteristics of the mentally deficient judgement: concretism, lack of coherence and a lack of critic on his reasoning. All these characteristics have a great influence on the creation of their own self-image, through the fact they don’t differentiate enough their own qualities, are evidently verbally incoherent, both when they refer to themselves or to the ones surrounding them. Their self-image is consequently incoherent, inconsistent with reality, lack of critical sense.

The affective dimension is quite immature, and it reveals through lack of autonomy, egoism, tendency to aggressivity, rigidity, dependency, and an utter need for protection. The mentally deficient are generally characterized by a delay in organizing their affective behaviour as a result of the fact that their emotionality is intricately tied to the structures of personality, and it manifests itself depending on its evolution. It is proper to the mentally deficient to not know what they want, which implies permanent indications from the outside but also indicates the need for exercise to help create positive behavioural reactions and inhibit the negative ones, especially during their educational process.

From the point of view of the cognitive, emotional, and personality processes, P. Popescu-Neveanu structures and synthesises the characteristics of the mentally deficient as follows – “The mental deficiency is characterized through an insufficiently developed judgement, manifested through difficult understanding, limited to the concrete aspect of the life situations and phenomena but also through emotional primitivism and weakness of will. The mentally deficient is almost incapable of abstract thinking, cannot make general, essential connections between the objects and the phenomena of reality and their capacities of criticism, discrimination or mathematical calculation are poor. From a behavioural perspective, they have skills and abilities of civilized conduct, but prove weakness in their disclosures. They are easily manipulated, naïve. Their possibilities to work or to make an intellectual effort are reduced.” (Popescu-Neveanu, 1978, p. 111).

The specificity of the psychic subsystems of the mentally deficient is given by a series of characteristic features, out of which, the most relevant are the pathological heterochrony and the genetical viscosity, which, through the convergence with another specific characteristic of the mental deficiency, the oligophrenic inertia, confers a global and fundamental mark to this category. It is the “fragility of personality” which manifests trenchantly in the general process of their adaptability, in their verbal conduct, in their daily activities and behaviour. (Verza, apud. Verza, 2011, p. 131). The fundamental heterochrony, phenomenon explained by R. Zazzo (1979) and his collaborators, identifies the differences in development, between the normal child and the one with deficiency of intellect. It is the different rhythm between the physical and the mental development which confers to the mentally deficient a disharmonious specificity of its psychological profile. The specificity of this profile is emphasised by acquiring an obvious individual lure, based on that “deficit in intellectual organisation” outlined by the insufficiency of the synthesis between speed and precision, in the process of different problem solving. (Radu,

1999). Given the fact that specialists considered that the heterochronic rhythms of development of the mentally deficient do not fully explain the specificity of its disharmonious profile, the literature has been studying, as mentioned before, another phenomenon, characteristic to the deficient of intellect, called the “fragility”. This manifests itself both at the level of verbal conduct and when it comes to the entire structure of its personality. The weakness of the verbal conduct has been described by E. Verza (1995), using as criteria the performance and ability to communicate of the mentally deficient. Their verbal conduct has been characterized by the author through “the failure of the mentally deficient to express the content of significant situations in a logical-grammatical manner, to maintain the level of a continuous progress and to adapt its verbal conduct to changes given by different circumstances” (Verza, apud. Verza, 2011, p. 137). The fragility of the mentally deficient’s personality has also been studied by F. Rau, regarding their relationship with the complex social environment, which surpasses, most of the times, their possibilities to adapt. Their personality is characterised by a specific behaviour, explicable through some characteristic, simultaneous features, the most trenchant being the fragility and their immaturity. The literature has analysed this phenomenon, dividing it into dissociated fragility (showing harshness, hard to control impulsiveness, ingenuity, and lack of trust) and masked fragility (found in the mentally deficient placed into a secure environment, who manages to dissimulate its fragility but for whom, the return into society can break the achieved equilibrium).

3. The Learning Experience. Segregated Schools Versus Normal Grades

The analysis of the most important characteristics of the mentally deficient reveals undoubtedly the differences in structure, both for personality and for cognition, towards the normal. Based on these features, several controversies have arisen, regarding both the strategies of their integration into the educational process and those regarding which would be the most adequate type of education for them – inclusive versus segregated education. “The capacity of learning” of the mentally deficient has been topic of study for numerous researchers, who have looked both into multiple ways of learning, (as the associative, the discriminative, based on memorising or on the concept creation), and into the identification of the perceptive or motivational factors of learning. (Zazzo, 1979). The learning experience of the mentally deficient has also been studied by the local literature, P. Arcan & D. Ciumageanu placing the educational and cognitive experience to the intersection

between pedagogy and medicine. The authors have revealed a series of changes and restructures in the educational act, offering it a new specific and new possibilities and transforming it into an educational-therapeutic act. They described it as “a precisely vectorised action which aims to transmit knowledge, to structure or restructure a skill or an ability, to create or recreate a feature of character, a social attitude, a positive manifestation of personality.” (Arcan & Ciumageanu, 1980, p. 329). Through this very new concept, profiled as a special discipline at the intersection between pedagogy and medicine, the specialists investigate the identification of new components of the educational process which can find a therapeutical equivalent, counterbalancing in this way the deficits of the current educational system. The incorporation of these new components and the ideal environment for application and progress, lead to the current tendencies as well as to a new field of study and research regarding the integration in the educational system of the mentally deficient. It regards undoubtedly the optimum alternative between integrated or segregated education.

The efficiency of placing them into special classes has been extendedly studied and researched by the specialists, with disappointing results most of the times, which did not succeed in highlighting and propelling the idea that segregation would be a viable solution for a better social integration for the mentally deficient and/or for a culminating academic progress. Kirk (1964) conducted a study in order to reveal the benefits of placing the mentally retarded in special classes, but the empirical evidence was too poor in order to draw an action plan for this matter. His conclusions highlighted: a. The academical superiority of those enrolled into normal classes, b. The children with a low level of educability were academically equal or even superior, in special classes, c. A better social adjustment of the mentally deficient in the special classes compared to those in normal classes, d. The tendency to isolation of those in normal classes due to peer attitude. Other specialists as Dunn (1968), Bandura (1969), Bersoff, Kobbler, Fiscus & Ankney (1972), Vacc (1972), etc., have conducted numerous studies trying to identify the best solution for the educability of the mentally deficient, considering their characteristics, their needs, and their own rhythm of development. Even though the academic results represent a fundamental variable of all the studies realised on this topic, being considered an instrument of evaluation of the scholar success/insuccess, a crucial cornerstone is represented by the socio-adaptive perspective, in other words, by the way in which the peers, teachers and the very environment attitude can affect the mentally deficient. The socio-adaptive perspective has therefore become a fundamental reason to

reexamine the paradigm, underlining the need for a systematic evaluation of the peers and teachers' attitude, key factors of influence in the integration and development of the mentally deficient. The studies conducted with this end revealed a generally negative attitude, (Goodman, Gottlieb&Harrison, 1972), the failure in integration and association to the agreed standards of behaviour in a normal grade being the main causes for rejection. Labelling, from both teachers and peers (Cook&Wallerstein, 1984), and the self-fulfilling prophecies in classroom, (Rosenthal&Jacobson, 1966), are two of the main causes of a poor and failed integration of the mentally deficient into the normal educational system. And still, the impossibility to empirically validate the assumption that segregated, special classes would be the best solution for a better social adaptation and for a remarkable academical progress, lead to the conclusion of embracing the need to reevaluate the current instruments and models, considered to be obsolete, and to act at all three levels of attitude – peers, teachers and society in general. Taylor (1973) concluded that „grouping handicapped children together, has no beneficial effect”. From this point of view, the literature revealed three essential directions to take into account, which pledge for a better socio-academical integration of the mentally deficient into the normal educational system: the multidimensionality of the mentally deficient conditions, the standardization of the contrast concept and the avoiding of the stereotypes produced by labelling. The principle of normalization became therefore the cornerstone of this controversy, revealing the urge for equity of environment and possibilities for both categories.

4. The Inclusive Schools and the Equity in Opportunities

In a local context, the terminology special educational needs represent a relatively new concept in the educational sciences ambit, this being considered already, in many other countries as revealed by the before mentioned studies, a real paradigm of the educational field. Up to the 70', we have dealt with the same tendency to avouch for the existence of segregated classes, with multiple arguments such as: the mentally deficient's tendency to disturb the normal grades, the inferiority complex that these can feel towards their normal peers, the special schools' facilities regarding specially trained personnel and adequate educational instruments for each category of deficiency. The disadvantages of the “isolation” are though far more numerous and important, most of them being considered real obstacles in fulfilling the socio-adaptive perspective of the educational process. Among these we can mention: the

impersonality of the relationships developed in the special institutions (the lack of a genuine connection between the children and their carer, a connection based on affect, attention, availability, emotion and security); the type of assistance „in production line” (most of the times, considering that they cannot manage themselves anyway, can be easily manipulated as objects without any acumen, desires, opinions, problems, etc.); the dependency at the same time gets stronger, as they are not encouraged to identify and develop their own mechanisms of surviving, to react to outside challenges, to decide and implicitly to become responsible for their own lives; and the impossibility of creating and developing social relationships, to take chores to an end, to learn how to manage on their own.

As mentioned before, the principle of normalization proved to be the ideal option of recognising their right of inclusion, belonging and participation to a proper, efficient and permanent education, which creates at the same time the premises of the future social and laboral integration.

The legislative context which postulated and promoted these principles on special needs education has been drawn by the UNESCO World Conference Statement: „Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.” (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994, p. 6). In this context, *the concept of special educational needs corresponds to an approach which: postulates the idea that every child is unique; recognizes/proves the fact that any child can learn; treasures the uniqueness of every type of learning depending on individual characteristics; promotes diversity among children as a way of learning which helps and strengthens learning when adequately used; considers the scholar curriculum as an instrument which needs to be flexible, to adapt to students’ needs and requirements.*

We can foresee the need of identifying some *agents of the change*, who can vary from the institutional framework, the educational curriculum and programme, to family, peers and, maybe the cornerstone for change and inclusion, to the teacher. The purpose of a cumulative effort from all these agents is to ensure equity of opportunities to all students, this ambition being possible to realize only by guaranteeing, for each and every student, the utmost level of development,

considering their own possibilities and abilities. From this point of view, education acquires both an integrated and a differentiated attribute. The integrated character of inclusive education materializes by not “tearing apart” the child from its family and society, isolating it in a specialised institution, whereas the differentiated attribute, resides in the system’s adaptability to each and every child’s particularities.

5. Conclusions

No matter the rhythm of development, the cognitive portrait of each student, the psychic particularities or the specific of its personality, the contemporary society has a moral duty to grant equity of opportunities, even though on different sections and depending on specificities, to all children. The inclusive school appears to be the optimum choice for the development, integration, and psycho-pedagogical and socio-emotional support of the mentally deficient. The current dynamics of development postulates the idea of an educational system as a process, and not as a product, as we have been used to. Therefore, the children with deficiency of intellect have the right to take advantage of such a system which can respond to their own very needs, capable to adjust in order to embrace the needs of the most vulnerable, a system which is not static but a process, which indicates *which is the best way to make room for each and every individual*.

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